

# In Context

*In Context* informs, educates, and creates new ideas on Context Sensitive Solutions

## District 5 Director Defines CSS

By Cindy Utter

SAN LUIS OBISPO – Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS) is a process that is collaborative, compatible and credible, according to District 5 Director R. Gregg Albright.

"We need to respect that stakeholder values are important to them," he said. "And we need to find a way ideally to meet their needs."

He defined a stakeholder as anyone from Caltrans staff to a regulatory agency or even a neighborhood group.

On collaboration, he said a solution should respect, understand and consider the stakeholders' values. "Any stakeholder compromise should be viewed as reasonable and acceptable."



District 5 Director, R. Gregg Albright

At the discussion table, he said to "listen carefully to others and attempt to understand their core values without being positional." Try to determine the motivation that led them to a particular solution. Often, this positive communication leads to more than one acceptable answer.

Referring to a stakeholder with a "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) perspective, he said the person is more willing to compromise once they have participated in a "collaborative process" with community members.

This means the group has listened to the individual, given them time and respect, and fully considered their needs and values. Hopefully, the person will then own others' values beyond their personal interests and, thus, will be more willing to make a sacrifice if necessary.

Overall, we must balance being responsive to stakeholder requests with our mission of improving mobility across California, he said. "In our enthusiasm to be a good neighbor, we might forget our obligations and responsibilities. It's okay to say 'no' to a request, but we better have first tried very hard to say 'yes.'"

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### THE CSS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE GROUP IDENTIFIED THESE MAIN CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING CSS:

- ✓ Communication and training
- ✓ Manuals, standards, and review processes
- ✓ Resource Allocation
- ✓ Early and continuous stakeholder involvement

### CSS is a Philosophy

Caltrans Director Jeff Morales describes CSS as a philosophy that prescribes that community needs be considered in solving transportation problems. Since the department began its effort to incorporate sensitivity to context into its project development process, the name for the effort has changed from context sensitive "design" to context sensitive solutions."

(Please see PHILOSOPHY p2)

## CSS Team Offers Recommendations

Fully instituting Context Sensitive Solutions throughout the district is the goal for the District 5/Central Region CSS Technical Assistance Group. So far, the multi-disciplinary team has developed 25 recommendations and 19 performance measures for getting CSS done. It has also identified 20 new or revised procedures for assisting the process.

The TAG plans to release these recommendations in an official report to top management soon. Throughout the study, District Director Gregg Albright gave the group guidance and direction. Team leader Tim Rochte said to keep the information focused and more easily analyzed, the TAG studied the following functions: Planning; Project Management; Design and Engineering Services, including Landscape Architecture, Hydraulics, Electrical and Office Engineer; Environmental; Construction; and Traffic Safety, Operations, Maintenance and Permits.

Above all, the recommendations were created to ensure all Caltrans projects balance traveler safety with community values.

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## DIRECTOR

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For compatibility, Albright said solutions should complement the surrounding urban or rural environment. Ideally, they should be an "asset" to the locality rather than a "liability."

Caltrans promotes livable communities. As such, we should ask ourselves whether our projects—built or proposed—"make the community more or less livable?"

For credibility, solutions must be "functionally and financially feasible," he said. They must accomplish their function and be attainable or they're not a solu-

tion. It's all right to have a "spectacular vision for transportation or land use," he said. But it must be "achievable with logical steps." He suggested using "phase-able" strategies to reach the "ultimate goal."

The most important element of CSS is "defining the problem or opportunity that cannot be missed," he said. "Clear problem definition guides the development of all CSS."

He likened the process to peeling an onion to get to the "core issues." It is the ability to discover or create the "ideal outcome." And "no single stakeholder can

completely define the problem on their own. "Caltrans is now implementing CSS in response to "significant" changes in the transportation industry during the last 30 years, he said. There is a "nation-wide trend calling for transportation professionals to behave differently if they wish to be successful." This means Caltrans must "evolve to remain relevant and provide leadership."

[Part Two of this article will appear in the next issue of *In Context*.]

## PHILOSOPHY

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That is because the goal is to find ways to make our projects work within the environment, natural or man-made. Context-sensitive solutions incorporate the features and character of the surroundings through which our projects pass. They recognize that we are making long-term investments that should reflect and even enhance communities and the environment.

Our transportation developers must consider: the constructed and natural environment of the area; environmental scenic, aesthetic, community and preservation impacts; and access to and incorporation of various modes of transportation.

— Caltrans Journal,  
January-February, 2002,  
Volume 2-Issue 4



## WORDS OF WISDOM

**Make praise mean more** by coming up with more specific ways to say "Good job." *Examples:* "Superb analysis," "I appreciate your hard work on this," "Your recommendations are right on the mark."

—Communication Briefings

Adapted from *The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership*, Steven Sample, Jossey-Bass (800-274-4434).

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Please let us know if you have questions about Context Sensitive Solutions. We will use your question in a future FAQ column. You can e-mail questions to Cindy Utter in

Caltrans, District 5 Community Planning.

Cindy.Utter@dot.ca.gov.

## New CSS Book Now On-Line

The Transportation Research Board is now offering the National Cooperative Highway Research Program Report #480: *A Guide to Best Practices for Achieving Context Sensitive Solutions*. The guidebook focuses on how State departments of transportation and other related agencies incorporate

context sensitivity into their transportation development work. It applies to a wide variety of projects that these agencies regularly encounter and is also a useful tool for stakeholders. For copies, contact the TRB at [www.TRB.org](http://www.TRB.org).

## C o n t e x t S e n s i t i v e S o l u t i o n s

use innovative and inclusive approaches that integrate and balance community, aesthetic, historic, and environmental values with transportation safety, maintenance, and performance goals. Solutions are reached through a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach involving all stakeholders.

— draft California Transportation Plan 2025, September 25, 2002